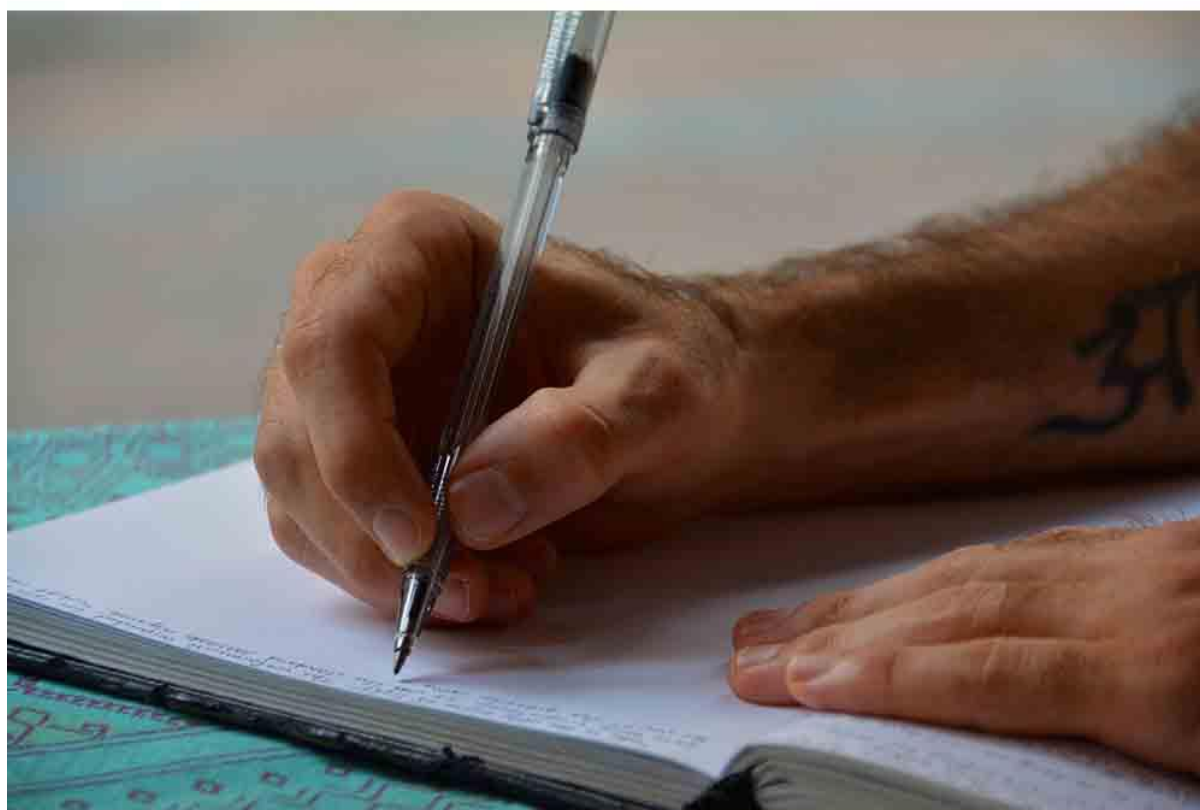


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The New Woman in Advaita Kala's *almost single*

Abstract

This paper investigates the rise of Chick-Literature as popular fiction in Indian English literary canon. Considered post-millennial, post-feminist literature, this body of writings delves into women's role and identity in the 21st Century. Their narrative no longer projects female protagonists as oppressed or suppressed by society, but portrays them as stuck into a web of indecisiveness, a transitory phase where they are frozen into inaction on account of clashes of old value system with fast emerging, new-age sensibilities. Take Aisha as an example- a protagonist in *Almost Single* by Advaita Kala, Aisha is a 29-year-old, financially-independent woman who is on a mission to find herself a life partner. In this pursuit, she is often rendered helpless on account of the intense struggle to assimilate a value system she has inherited from her parents with the new that every day brings.

Through Aisha, the author introduces the idea of single women in Indian society, which continues to see their existence as taboo. The chick-lit narrative brings out the complexities, challenges and issues surrounding young women, including their right to choose and live a life of their liking in transitioning patriarchal societies. Though these women are no longer expressly stigmatized by the conventional society, they are caught up between being strong

and independent and retaining enough docility to accommodate the concerns of their family. What makes chick lit distinct is the way it addresses women's concerns and life choices in contemporary India. This paper examines in detail the idea of 'new woman' propagated by chick-lit with reference to Advaita Kala's work *Almost Single* (2007). The effort will help throw new light on the life journey of women in India in the 21st Century.

Keywords: Chick-lit, Popular Fiction, New Narratives, New Woman, Contemporary India

Introduction

The influence of Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* in the UK and Candace Bushnell's *Sex and the City* in the USA, led to the birth of a new genre of writing in women's literature, Chick-Lit. Usually written by women for an audience comprising predominantly of women, this kind of writing draws from the life experiences of its authors and expresses a woman's point of view towards the world at large. Perceived to be non-serious in nature, "its claim to literary status has remained undecided"¹. Nonetheless, it continues to stay in the limelight on account of its popularity with a sizeable and almost unquestioningly adoring fans on the one hand and the outright disdain of critics on the other².

In the years after 1991, economic liberalization in India provided opportunities to many young and aspiring middle classes women to work in the corporate sector. This led to their financial independence and exposure to a modern lifestyle based on the western ideas of love and marriage. The idea of a chick-lit protagonist, who grows up in the transition years of economy and thus is always caught up in balancing a world based on solid, traditional value

¹ Carvalho, Charmaine(2016), "Chick lit in India: Possibilities for a Feminine Aesthetics in Popular Fiction", *Estetyka i Krytyka The Polish Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 41: pp.15

² Ibid

system before 1991 to the new age of MTV, mobile phones and internet mobility, tapped on popular sentiment in India from the year 2005.

An editorial in Washington Post, published on November 23, 2007, described Indian Chick-Lit as the “latest and most irreverent entrant into the world of English Language fiction here.” The paper said that with its’ “cheeky heroines”, the “girl-having-fun genre” is being much appreciated by the Indian readers: *Almost Single* by Advaita Kala was lapped up by the large and hitherto untapped market of young women of 25-30 years³.

There were two reasons for its’ success: Firstly, as a post modern genre of romance, Indian chick literature presented a realistic portrait of single women, their hopes and disappointments when the romantic ideals did not match up to the reality, and the constant struggle they faced in conforming to their families’ expectations in terms of the social values while expressing what they felt as opinionated, educated, financially independent women. Secondly, the genre also struck a chord with women readership as young women writers like Advaita Kala explored the stereotypes and social taboos associated with women. Heroines of these chick lit were also embraced by the new-age readers for representing the social ethos in light and humorous manner.

These novels or novellas are essentially the narratives of female protagonists as New-Age women going about their lives in urban cities in India. The heroines are usually projected as single women of marriageable age who have a career as well as the spirit to enjoy ordinary moments even as they search for significant romantic relationships. There are usually women one typically reads of in novels associated with western culture and civilisation⁴.

³ Lakshmi, Rama (2007) “Sassy Chick lit finds new fans among India’s young women”, Washington Post, *Los Angeles Times*, November 30. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2007-nov-30-et-chicklit30-story.html>

⁴ Carvalho, Charmaine(2016), “Chick lit in India: Possibilities for a Feminine Aesthetics in Popular Fiction”, *Estetyka i Krytyka The Polish Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 41: pp.16

Singleness as new identity in *Almost Single*

Chick- Lit usually employs the first-person narrative to bring out different themes to its readers: for example, the novel *Almost Single* is proof of the growing number of single women in cosmopolitan cities around India. “The rising number signifies a paradigmatic shift in India’s patriarchal social set up”⁵ which usually prefers women to settle down in matrimony at the earliest. The novel is also symbolic of empowerment as women respond to myriad challenges associated with young, unmarried women by progressing in career and rising to social positions where they have both freedom to take decisions as well as the social and economic leeway to steer their lives and influence others in an environment which is fast transitioning towards a progressive, western country.

Despite all the changes, getting married is still a desired objective for most of the women in India: suitable matches are arranged by parents in consultation with astrologers and family relatives. Irrespective of the academic, financial and professional achievements, women are still expected to bow to traditions and sacrifice their individuality and expectations to please the in-laws and the potential grooms. Chick-Lit works for its soft-edged defiance which while mocking the system indulges its protagonists for their endearingly human qualities, their frailties, and blind spots.

For example, Aisha in *Almost Single* is 29-years-old and still unmarried woman. She has two friends: Anushka who is divorced and Misha who is also single like her. Aisha “works in a hotel and leads a busy life, meeting a lot of interesting people along the way”⁶. Aisha is romantic and longs for her ideal man but is not desperate to get married: she deals with her loneliness by socializing with her best friends or by going to parties. Her narratives are humorous and evoke smiles if not laughter. Aisha introduces herself: “*This is my story*

⁵ Mukhopadhyay, Jayita (2016), “Identity of ‘Single Woman’ in India: A Narrative of Exclusion and Striving for Empowerment”, *International Research Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol. 5(10): pp.2.

⁶ Kala, Advaita (2007), *Almost Single*, India: HarperCollins Publisher, pp. 3.

*and of those who occupy this world with me. My name is Aisha Bhatia, I am twenty-nine-years-old and single”*⁷. Here, she is seen as a woman who is not shy about her single status and directly comments that: *“The older the guy gets, the bigger his dating pool. It works just the reverse for women. We come attached with a best before tag and if God forbid, we reach the expiry date while still single, it’s downhill all the way from there”*⁸.

These lines paint a realistic picture of how women are perceived socially in India. Aisha is not interested in forced encounters, yet her mother registers Aisha’s profile on online marriage website - desivivah.com - and ask Aisha to meets men to find a suitable match for herself. That Aisha is not desperate for marriage becomes evident in her musings where she says: *“I think there is a point in everyone’s life when the search for Mr. Right is reduced to the search for Mr. Right Now. A desperate attempt at fleeing loneliness often results in fleeting relationships. It’s at this point that we get all fatalistic about love and adopt the que sera sera attitude”*⁹. Finally, when she starts dating Karan, she is not yet ready to marry him although she realises that she loves him.

It can be said that Aisha deals with dilemmas in her life regarding marriage, love, work, family and a search for identity with dollops of honesty and good humour. Her struggle is relevant as it explores issues each working woman has to face in India on a daily basis. So, chick lit can be read with an understanding that its protagonists are women who have benefited from feminism, which has given them freedom to make honest choices.

But at the same time it can be said that while many choose to be single, it is still undecided whether they are happy to be single. Post-feminism, there has been a widening up of life choices for women and their struggle to match their aspirations with their families’

⁷ Ibid. pp. 2

⁸ Ibid. pp. 11

⁹ Ibid, pp.230

expectations reflects in their moments of self-doubt and the struggle to maintain their individuality without hurting those they love.

The new women of India and the protagonists of Indian chick lit are empowered individuals who neither relapse into feminist traditions nor submit to consumer rule books that dominate markets. Their brand of feminism does not assert the primacy of one kind of role over the other. On the other hand, it rejuvenates the aspects of womanhood which were suppressed by the earlier feminists in their quest to win gender equality and financial independence. The 21st Century feminism does not dissociate from the past but attempts to revive its relevance in the face of a society confronted by significant and fast-paced socioeconomic changes.

Conclusion

Indian Chick-Lit is still a work in progress, written by women for women readers through a bold, humorous and heartfelt narrative. It views the world in a manner that contemporary women in their late 20's and 30's see as they negotiate their life priorities and interests to create momentous choices. Indian Chick-Lit has acquired a significant place in Indian contemporary society; it has given opportunities to young women to voice their aspirations and desires even as they are caught in the mishmash of modernity and traditional family lifestyle. *Almost Single* is a fantastic example of this.

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